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IN WASH. D.C. ILL

WASHINGTON POST
12 December 1985

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Nicaragua Harassed Embassy Workers

The full story can now be told of the Sandinista government's attempt to intimidate employees of the U.S. Embassy in Managua.

Last month, the embassy's native Nicaraguan employees were hauled in, one at a time, for interrogation by the secret police. Women employees were stripped and asked humiliating questions about their sex lives; several of the embassy workers were threatened with death if they continued to work for the "gringos."

The State Department delivered a sharp protest to the Nicaraguan charge d'affaires in Washington, and the local embassy employees in Managua have not been similarly bothered since, sources told our associate Lucette Lagnado. At least one of the harassed employees has resigned.

According to classified cables from the embassy in Managua, 15 Nicaraguan employees were summoned early in November to the headquarters of the Directorate General of State Security, Nicaragua's secret police. The embassy provided transportation for some of the employees to show its support.

The secret cables describe the nightmare that followed:

- After arrival at the headquarters, the embassy employees were usually taken to El Chipote prison. There they were placed in "small, dark rooms (about the size of a telephone booth)." After several hours in one of these cubicles, each employee was taken to another room for interrogation.

- Women were ordered to undress and were asked whom they were sleeping with. Some were accused

of being sexually involved with American employees of the embassy.

- The interrogation techniques often seemed to have been lifted from "Casablanca" or some other old movie. "We have a number of ways to make people talk," one inquisitor warned his victim. Another Sandinista goon told an embassy worker he was "always followed," and bragged that the secret police covered the country "inch by inch and has eyes and ears everywhere."

- No physical violence was reported, though one employee complained that he was "treated harshly by his interrogators."

- Several of the embassy employees were accused of being CIA spies, especially those who had been to Washington on embassy business.

- Most of the employees were "repeatedly threatened with long-term imprisonment" if they didn't cooperate with the authorities, and some were warned that they would end up "in the cemetery." One was told he must be "integrated into the revolution or leave the country." They were compelled to sign papers agreeing to provide information to the police on embassy matters.

- The interrogators wanted to know about the sexual inclinations of various American Embassy employees. And they were curious about a bunker being built on the embassy grounds, warning the Nicaraguan employees that the embassy could not protect them in the event of a U.S. invasion.

When word of the interrogations reached Washington, State Department officials summoned the Nicaraguan charge for a dressing-down, and a blistering protest note was later delivered.